

Merchants' Hotel  
(Washington Hotel)  
40-50 No. Fourth Street  
Philadelphia  
Philadelphia County  
Pennsylvania

HABS No. PA-1445

HABS  
PA,  
51-PHILA,  
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PHOTOGRAPHS  
HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey  
National Park Service  
Department of the Interior  
Washington, O.C. 20240

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

MERCHANTS' HOTEL  
(Washington Hotel)

HABS No. PA-1445

Location: 40-50 North Fourth Street, Philadelphia, Philadelphia  
County, Pennsylvania.

The two following architectural reports for Merchants' Hotel were written in 1963 and 1966. The 1963 report was written by D.B. Myer, a staff member of the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS). The short 1966 report provides further architectural information, written following the complete destruction of the building from a fire in that year, by A. Craig Morrison, also a HABS staff member.

1963 REPORT

The Merchants' Hotel, originally the Washington Hotel, was built ca. 1837 by Philadelphia architect William Strickland. It was described in its youth as one of the more desirable hotels in the grand manner of the early Nineteenth Century. It was visited by the Presidents Van Buren, Pierce, and Buchanan. Even though the building is presently used as a warehouse and for office space, it retains most of its original architectural character.

The structure consists of one main block 125' by 40', which is five floors high. To the west of the main block is a large wing and to the south, at the west end of the west wing, is a smaller wing. The structure is of red brick and has wooden trim at the windows and doors with some stone trim at the heads and sills. The roof is flat with a pediment at the front. The structure is timber post-and-beam with cast-iron collars at the tops of the columns.

The hotel faces Fourth Street, to the east. The front elevation is rectangular, with the greater dimension being the horizontal one. The entire is then capped by a low pediment. The wall surface reads as brick, except for the first floor and part of the second, which are colonnaded. The columns run along the entire first floor dividing it into nine bays.

They are topped by a continuous plastered beam. The shafts of the columns are smooth and the capitals have a simple Greek Revival leaf pattern. The infill between the columns is all wood and glass. These at present comprise shopfronts; every other bay being a double door, with display windows between. The center bay is the main entrance to the building. Also, on the front of the building at the sidewalk level are four basement entrances. The second floor has its center five bays recessed back from the front of the building about four feet. This recess, then, is colonnaded with a smaller version of those columns used on the first floor. Across the front of the recess is a heavy wire railing in a diagonal pattern. The wall surface within the recess is plastered. The windows have been simply set in place with little trim. These have stone heads which are very low pediments, supported, by brackets at either end. These pieces are solid and rather stylized. The windows are wooden double hung six-over-six light sash; many have been replaced. The north side of the hotel is exposed and is a simplified version of the front facade. To the west of the main block, is the rear wing, accessible from the landings of the main stair in the front block. This wing is also five stories high. The sash on this portion of the structure is one-over-one light double hung wood, with plain wooden face trim. This area has exposed tie rod ends. The wing which goes to the south from the west wing, gives the appearance of being even more utilitarian. The structure and the heights are the same but the windows are a smaller version. Due to existing conditions in the area, the remnants of a service yard and stable on the southwestern portion of the hotel are vague indeed.

The stairs from the sidewalk to the basement are each equipped with wrought-iron railings. The northernmost stairwell is the most formal, having a pattern of tall narrow panels described in moldings. The three

remaining stairs are sided in vertical tongue-and-groove planks; the remaining details are similar. It does not appear that the tongue-and-groove planks were put over the elaborate paneling.

To the east of the hotel and across Fourth Street is the property of the Friends Meeting House. To the north is a parking lot; north of the parking lot are row houses. To the south is a group of three and four floor commercial buildings, most of which are small. To the west is a cemetery. The cemetery is enclosed by a high brick wall; one of the gates is attached to the southwestern wing of the hotel. This is quite a nice semi-circular topped ornamental wrought-iron gate.

The north elevation of the hotel's main block, at its northwestern corner has a curving facade of red brick. This has quite a large radius, with its center in the building, of about forty feet. This is a continuation of the north wall of the structure.

The floor plan of the main block is roughly rectangular with a center hall running from front to back. At the end of this hall, in the rear of the hotel, is the main and only stair for this section. On either side of this hall are large rooms, now used commercially for small businesses. The west wing, which is reached from the stair landing, has one long hall running east and west down the center of the rectangular block, and is flanked on either side by small rooms (once the guest rooms). At the west end of this wing is the other stair for the building. This stair is contained inside the structure itself, but is reached by means of an exterior balcony from the halls on each floor. All floors of this wing are alike. The first floor, however, at one time contained some of the primary public rooms of the hotel. The upper

floors of the main front block all have a center hall, over the first floor hall, but the hall branches to the north and south at the geometric center of the structure, making it cross-shaped. This hall then leads into small rooms.

The main entry hall of the hotel is simple Greek Revival and sets the architectural theme of the entire structure. There are tongue-and-groove wainscoting, plaster walls and ceilings and wooden floors. There are some archaic radiators and no original lighting fixtures. The wainscoting is painted, and from surface evidence the woodwork seems to have been painted in woodgrain at one time. There is a small foyer between the sidewalk and the main hall. This foyer does not appear to be in its original state. The double doors from the foyer to the hall have an arched top and their upper halves glazed. The lower panels have molded trim panels.

The trim is very simple, with just a suggestion of a simple pilaster to the sides of each door, and a flat plain piece on the tops. The windows have simple trim inside and they have interior shutters, which fold into the walls. The shutters are made up of vertical panels. There is quite a variety of doors in the hotel; most of them do have some form of vertical accentuation. Some have two vertical panels, side by side. Some have one horizontal over two vertical on the bottom, and glass above. Most doors have glazed pivoting transoms.

There are two utility elevators in the main hall, neither of which is original, which were steam operated. The stair is all of wood, with some exposed structure. The newel posts are simple with some reeding and flat tops. On the second floor are some more elaborate doorways. One of these has a large fanlight transom and some others show a mild

Palladian influence. The rear or west wing has diagonal wood floors and wooden partitions between the rooms. The hall is plastered, and this plaster is not convincingly original. The ceiling is exposed joist and floor board of the upper floor, in each case. The doors and trim and window shutters are all similar to those in the main block of the building. Throughout the main block there is evidence of truss construction. In some places, the bottom chord of a truss will become the head of the door, with the door trim bolted onto the chord. This is done very openly, as are the other columns, collars and beams. There are six sealed chimnies on the roof and some remnants of fireplaces. The mantelpieces appear to have been Greek Revival and very simple. Many of the doors in the basement of the west wing appear to have been second hand and altered slightly. On some of the upper floors of the main structure there are also some doors which appear to have had upper lights added. Most of these doors seem to be the age and style of the building. None of the original plumbing fixtures appear to remain in the building. The Hotel generated its own electricity at one time, and supplied it to the neighboring structures. The over-all character of the interior of the Merchants' Hotel is quite utilitarian, with simple wood and plaster construction. The brick walls are bearing, and foundations are of brick.

The entire impression of the building is one of utility, the exterior facade being rather simple and plain, and built of basic materials. On the interior, the use of wood and the exposed structure further this effect.

Nowhere is ornament carried to the point of excess, or to the point that one would consider luxurious. The columns and their bolted construction are obvious throughout the structure. One would certainly assume that the luxurious aspect that the hotel once had, came strictly from its furnishings, rather than its architectural character.

1966 REPORT

During the night of February 9, 1966 the Merchants' Hotel was totally destroyed by fire. A survey of the rubble showed that all first floor stonework was of solid marble. The columns were monolithic marble shafts. The length of the first floor column shaft was 8 feet 3 1/2 inches exclusive of the capital and base. Its top diameter was 1 foot 1 inch and its bottom diameter 1 foot 3 inches. All stonework was covered with many coats of paint, some of the earlier ones containing sand. Two first floor capitals, two second floor capitals and one first floor column base, as well as a section of the iron screen from the second floor porch are in the possession of Independence National Historical Park, Philadelphia, Pa.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

Old print of Merchants' Hotel available at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, 1300 Locust Street, Philadelphia, Pa. It is filed in the Campbell Collection, Vol. 89, p. 150.

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Bowen, Daniel. A History of Philadelphia. pp. 156-157. Philadelphia: Daniel Bowen, 1839.

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Westcott, Thompson. The Official Guide Book to Philadelphia. p. 65. Philadelphia: Porter and Coates, 1875

Newspaper article. Philadelphia Advertiser. April 22, 1837. Place of repository not known.